

Accessing the Invisible God

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Given 21-Jan-12; Sermon #1084b

As a child I remember being absolutely fascinated with the concept of invisibility. I counted all the things that I could get away with if people could not see me. People would actually forget about me and I could live like a free spirit. I did not know that term at the time; it came along later, but that is the way I was thinking. I would not have to go to bed when told, and more importantly, I could get up at 1 o'clock in the morning and go into the kitchen and raid the cookie jar...all undetected.

Then my grandmother burst my bubble. One time she was talking to me on the subject and she reminded me that I would find invisibility quite uncomfortable. People, not seeing me, would step all over me. They would forget to set a place at the dinner table for me; they would sit on me. They would turn off the lights in the room because they thought that there was no one there. And most importantly they would close the refrigerator door on my invisible hand as I was grabbing for some food.

This idea of invisibility was just too much for me. I could not address all of those issues. So, I developed an answer to this: a concept of porosity. I thought that if I could just pass through people, they would not step all over me, and they would not sit on me. They could close the refrigerator door or the car door and not catch my fingers. So, I wanted to be both invisible, and I wanted to be porous.

Then I got to thinking...how would I control my porosity? If I could pass through a wall, and I could pass through the chair which I was sitting in, I could land on the floor. Then I realized that if I was lying on a bed, I would fall on the floor. But why would the floor stop me? I would just continue to fall through the floor, down through the earth, and end up on the other side of the planet upside down I reasoned. I remember asking my grandmother one time if people on the other end of the planet or the other end of the earth walked on their heads and whether they walked upside down or on their hands.

Well, my grandmother finally reminded me that, if I were invisible, I would become very lonely. All my friends would not be able to see me and forget all about me. I could not deal with all of these problems with invisibility, and I finally just forsook the whole idea of becoming invisible and decided that I had to live with the idea that people would have to see me, whether I wanted them to or not.

Brethren, my somewhat richardsque introduction today serves to preface my comments entitled "accessing the invisible and the remote." Let us focus for a few minutes on the invisibility of God as well as his remoteness. How accessible is God to us? And considering his invisibility and his remoteness, how accessible is he not only to us, but to the people in the world? Let us turn to Colossians 1:15-16. First, we will talk about God's invisibility. His invisibility, brethren, is real. It is as substantial as it gets. It is not the figment of a boy's imagination. In his fabulously rich

introductory comments in his letter to the Colossian church, the apostle Paul firmly establishes the fact of the invisibility of God. I will be in Colossians basically throughout my comments today. The subject is Christ. Paul says:

Colossians 1:15-16 He is the image of the invisible God [the Father], the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.

Well, the word invisible, brethren, is not really a difficult one at all. It is Strong's number 517. In the Greek, the root means: gazed at; or capable of being seen. The prefix "in" (as we all know) is a negative. And the English suffix "ible" is just the word "able." So invisible means: not able to be seen, or incapable of being seen.

Now, Colossians 1:2 points out the audience to which Paul was writing. He was writing to the saints. So he is writing to people. He is not addressing himself, angels, or animals, or anything like that. So looking at this verse in terms of its intended audience, we can conclude that God is invisible to people. This does not mean that angels cannot see him. Paul is silent on that issue there. But what Paul does say is that people, even the saints, cannot see God at the present time and in a physical sense. Now, why did I add this phrase "in a physical sense?" Because in this passage in Colossians 1, Paul is making a distinction between the physical and the spiritual, and he is saying that Christ bridges the two of them. Now let us go to Colossians 1:19-22.

Colossians 1:19-20 For it pleased the Father that in Him [in Christ] all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven having made peace through the blood of His cross.

So Christ was physical. Christ had blood. Christ died on a cross. You could see Christ and you could see his cross. Now the apostle John provides a second witness to the fact that Christ was—when he was on the earth—visible. Hold your finger there in Colossians and turn for a minute to I John 1:1 where John's introductory comments are made in his first letter:

I John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—

The apostles (or I should say the disciples at the time) could see and hear Christ. He was not invisible to them. He was certainly not porous to them; they could touch him. And indeed the same apostle—John—in Revelation 1:7, indicates that, "every eye will see Christ." Now, of course they will not see Him now; they will see him when he manifests himself at the right time.

Colossians 1:20-22 ...and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His [the Father's] sight—

Christ was not invisible, but Paul went out of his way (in verse 15) to make it clear that the Father, at least to humans and at least for now, is very much invisible. Now please turn to Acts 7: 55, and we will take a look at this invisibility.

Notice what Stephen, just prior to his death, saw and what he apparently did not see.

Acts 7:55 But he [Stephen], being full of the holy spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,

Perhaps he saw the light emanating from the father. Perhaps he saw his glory. Luke does aver that Steven saw God himself; it does not say that. It simply says that he saw Christ. There are a number of other references to the invisibility of God, and I want to review them with you. I am not stating these in any special order. We will begin in I Timothy 1:17 and take a look at some of the examples of God's invisibility, some of these statements about his invisibility in the New Testament. Paul is writing to Timothy, and he thanks God for His mercy and concludes with these words:

I Timothy 1:17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Now let us turn to the second example in I Timothy 6:16. And again, Paul presents the Father in terms of His invisibility. I want you to notice that this is really quite close to I Timothy 1:17 in many ways. Again, Paul just seems to be over-awed by God's power and he gives Him honor and glory. Referring to God, the apostle writes:

I Timothy 6:16 ...who alone has immortality dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen.

As a third example, notice John 1:18. John is writing here and says:

John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

Now in Hebrews 11:27 is the forth example. Paul, here in the faith chapter, is speaking of Moses. Moses acted as if he saw the invisible God- as if he saw God. Though he did not see him physically, of course we understand the he saw him with eyes of faith. Hebrews 11:27

Hebrews 11:27 By faith he [Moses] forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

Now as a final example we will take a look at Romans 1:20. Paul writes about God and here he says that it is his attributes which are invisible, but they are manifested in his creation. This is a little more subtle approach to God's invisibility.

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and godhead, so that they are without excuse.

As we looked at these five examples or statements of invisibility of God, please turn over to Matthew 26, because before I go on, I want to mention briefly that God's invisibility is not permanent. At His trial, Christ addressed His accusers, and He obliquely touches on the fact that in time we will be able to see the father.

Matthew 26:64 Jesus said to him, "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right had of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven."

Christ is talking to His accusers, and He is telling them of a time in the future when they will see Him seated next to the "Power." Now other translations render that word "Power" as the "the Almighty" or "the Mighty One." So this is clearly a reference to the Father. Certainly there is the implication that they will see the "Power," and they will see Christ.

Now this cannot be a reference to these folks meeting Christ at His second coming. For these accusers are long dead, brethren, they will not see Christ at his second coming. In saying what he did, I think Christ is looking well beyond the second coming, he is looking far into the future to the end of the white throne period, perhaps a little bit after that, when these individuals will themselves be god beings. Then they will be able to see the "Power." They will be able to see the Father and sitting next to Him, they see Jesus Christ. So with that being said, let us turn to Isaiah 14:13.

We are going to shift gears and take a look at another dimension of invisibility. We are going to take a look at the remoteness of God. This is as if it were another dimension or factor in the mix. The Logos is speaking to Satan and He says:

Isaiah 14:13 For you have said in your heart: "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north;

We understand from this that God lives somewhere in the North, and we need to pursue for a minute exactly what this word "side "means. It is Strong's number 3411, and in Hebrew it means "flank; rear; recess." Now for a little more comprehensive understanding of its meaning, I am going to string a number of verses together. We will take a look at Jeremiah 6:22 first. I am going to read it first from the King James Version, then look at some other translations.

Jeremiah 6:22 (King James Version) Thus saith the Lord, Behold, a people cometh from the north country, and a great nation shall be raised from the sides of the earth [That is the same word Strong's number 3411].

Now the in the Amplified version renders Jeremiah 6:22 like this:

Jeremiah 6:22 (Amplified) Behold a people is coming from the north country and a great nation is arousing itself on the end of the earth.

Holman translates Jeremiah 6:22 this way:

Jeremiah 6:22 (Holman) Look an army is coming from a northern land. A great

nation will be awakened from the remote regions of the earth.

So the noun "sides" carries with it the idea of remoteness, separation, or isolation. Now as a second example, please turn to Jeremiah 25: 32.

Jeremiah 25:32 (Amplified version) Thus says the Lord of hosts, Behold, evil shall go forth from nation to nation, and a great whirling tempest will raise from the uttermost parts of the earth.

The King James Version uses the term "coast lands" and Holman puts the last part of this passage this way. He says: "a great storm is stirred up from the end of the earth."

Now as a third example let us go back to Isaiah 37: 24. Now this is part of God's reply to the Assyrian King Sennacherib, who was attacking Jerusalem at the time. The King James Version renders it as "the sides of Lebanon." Holman put it this way:

Isaiah 37:24 (Holman) ...you have mocked the eternal through your servant. You have said that with my many chariots I have gone to the height of the mountains to the far recesses of Lebanon.

The Amplified Version translates it as "inner recesses." And finally as a fourth example, let us go back to Isaiah 14: 15. This time, God is telling Satan that he is not going to extend to the side of the north, but rather he says:

Isaiah 14:15 (King James Version) Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

The Amplified Version renders it "the inner most recesses of the pit." The International Version puts it as "the depths of the pit," and Holman refers to it as "the deepest regions of the pit." I do not know where that is, brethren, but I do not think that is where we want to be.

Through all this, the meaning of Strong's 3411 is pretty clear. It strongly carries with it the idea of inaccessibility due to isolation. Something far away, somewhere very hard to reach. Interestingly, brethren, this meaning has come down to us in the English. We say that a person is "sidelined." The term is related to game theory. The word draws its meaning from sports where, as we know, a field has some definite boundaries. Many games place very strict limits on the area of play. For example, in football or basketball, if the ball is carried or goes out of those limits it becomes out of play. And when one goes outside these boundaries, he is out of bounds. A sidelined player is marginalized; he is someone who is out of the game; he is tangential to the action at least for that moment. Now, in some ways, brethren, God has purposely "sidelined" Himself. We understand of course that He has maintained his unquestioned supremacy. He is still sovereign, yet we also know that He exercises His power through His Logos—through Jesus Christ, His Spokesman.

Paul made this clear, and there are a number of scriptures that talk about this. We are not going to go through them all. But Paul made this clear where we were in Colossians 1: 16. Remember he said that: "all things in heaven and earth were created by him," that is by Jesus Christ. So God has hidden himself, by his own definition, in some remote area of the heavens. We know

that it is in the North and that it is above all. It is almost as if a voice on your cell phone told you to look for your buddy on the North side of the gridiron. That information does help because in a well configured field that is at least one of the short sides, but if there are a whole lot of people at the game, you still have a lot of looking to do.

Okay, brethren, the question then is this: Does the fact that God dwells remotely from us and is invisible to us mean that He is inaccessible to us? Do these facts limit his accessibility? How far removed is God from us? I am not just asking this in terms of people in the Church of God, but I am asking it relation to those in the world. Do they have access to God or is He inaccessible to them? Is he remote to them? To begin answering that question, please turn to Act's 17: 26-29. The apostle Paul is speaking to the Athenians. As he stands in the mist of the very famous Areopagus, he makes an amazing comment to these people. Paul says:

Acts 17:25-29 Nor has He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He made from one blood every nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, [Why Does God do this, brethren? Paul is saying that God controls history. Why does God so closely control history, migrations, and the sifting of the people over the continent from one generation to the next? Why does God do this?] so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, "For we are also His offspring." Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

Brethren, Paul is speaking to gentiles, here, in an idolatrous city—the city of Athens. He is claiming that the true God is not far from them. Now how can this be, brethren? Were they called individuals, were they part of God's elect? Was Paul saying that they collectively made up the "pearl of great price?" Or that they were part of the special treasure of God? No, I do not think he was at all.

After all, we all understand that these people at that time were not new creations; they were not new creatures, not at that time. They were not regenerated, and what I mean by the term regenerated: they were not yet born again as we understand the term. But God was saying, still, that He was close to them, and I think there are two reasons for this. The first reason is that these people were hearing the gospel preached to them by Paul at that very moment—the gospel of the Kingdom of God. God was speaking to them through Paul.

The gospel is not a message that only a very few people have heard. Paul makes a very interesting statement in Colossians 1: 23. He is speaking to members of God's church and he refers to "the gospel that you have heard." The people of the church have heard the gospel, but notice what else he says. He says, "It is the gospel that has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven."

It appears that the apostles, brethren, were like Mr. Armstrong. They were very dynamic people. They did not live out their lives in Cappadocia or Damascus or Ionia preaching to a

handful of shepherds. Christ did not spend two and half to three and a half years training them for a ministry as limited as that. These men had apparently done as Christ had commanded them in Matthew 28:19, "they had gone to all nations." And the verb tense seems to indicate that they had preached the gospel around the world by the time Paul wrote to the Colossians.

I do not think we can say that every single person in the earth had heard the gospel at that time, but we certainly can say that that message had been preached in a far more widespread way than any of us seem to understand and appreciate. So in this sense, brethren, God had preached the gospel. God was close to people around the world.

I said that there were two ways that God was close to everyone. So as I begin to approach that second way, please turn to Colossians 1:16-17. In this way, I think we can understand that God is close even to those who are unregenerated. Verse 16 mentions one element of God's creative efforts. I will call it initiation. And verse 17 talks about the second element, we will call that maintenance. Another popular term for this is sustainability. So how does God sustain; how does He maintain His creation? Let us take a look at Colossians 1:16-17.

Colossians 1:16-17 For by him all things were created [this refers to the initial effort of God to create] that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. [verse 17 discusses Christ's sustaining or His maintenance activities. He sustains the creation.] And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

Other translations use the term "cohere." All things cohere or "stick together" because of Christ's ongoing work of maintaining the creation. And that is how it is that Paul could tell the Athenians that "we live, move, and exist in Him."

He holds everything together, He holds us together not only in the church, but the whole world. Now for a slightly different approach to this biblical understanding of sustainability, please turn to Act 14. Here Paul and Barnabas, speaking to some folk in Lystra who were as superstitious as they were zealous, talk further about God's sustaining work in creation and how that work meshes with history.

Paul is saying that through His creation (and he mentions it here in the form of rain and the seasonal cycles), God makes plain His presence to people.

Acts 14:14-17 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness."

Again, Paul says this to uncalled people. He is speaking to unregenerated people, people outside

the church. And it is because of God's sustaining efforts that people have no excuse for their failure to recognize and to acknowledge God. We read about this earlier in Romans 1: 20.

Now as a side bar, I want to mention Psalm 19: 1-4. We will not turn there. John Ritenbaugh mentioned this in a Berean this past week—that David, the psalmist, tells how he perceived God through His creation, not by seeing, but by hearing it. And he was (if I can keep the metaphor going) attuned to God through hearing the creation.

Well, let us look further at this idea that God is really very close to us. As we read Deuteronomy 4: 7, remember what Paul calls us in the church in I Peter 2: 9; we will not turn there, but he calls us "a Holy Nation."

Deuteronomy 4:7 For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?

So, Moses is referring to Israel, and very properly. We all understand that he is referring to the Israel of God, to the church, to this Holy nation that we are. God is near to us. Notice how Moses approaches this matter though, brethren. He speaks comparatively. He does not say that he has no relationships at all with the pagan nations, but rather he says that Israel's relationship with Him is closer. He asks rhetorically, "What nation has a god so near unto it as our God is to us?" Also jot down Jeremiah 23: 23; we will not have time to turn there. So, what did the psalmist have to say about God's closeness to him? Well, plenty. We will take a look at Psalm 139: 1-10.

Psalm 139:1-10 O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.

The psalmist understood, brethren, that God is not very far away from us at all. Brethren, though God is

remote and dwells as a consuming fire in a venue that is unknown to us and is remote from us, He is nevertheless closer to us than breathing. He is as close to us as the breath of life that He has given. He is not inaccessible to us at all, and when it comes right down to it, brethren, He is not really inaccessible to those in the world. But, brethren, we in his church especially remain the apple of His eye or the pupil of His eye. David talks about that in Psalms 17: 8. When we, and by "we" I mean the people in the church, call out to Him, we do so standing before the coals of fire in His northern home, in His holiest-of-all sanctuaries. For the time being God has ordained certain invisibility, a remoteness, in order that we might exercise our faith, to make it stronger.

I will close in Hebrews 10. Though invisible now, though dwelling remotely, he is not inaccessible to us at all, and in that fact we can remain confident and encouraged.

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.